

Macroeconomic policy and the Beijing+25 process

The landmark Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing 25 years ago, recognised the central role of macroeconomic policy in the promotion of women's rights. In subsequent years, however, debates on the achievement of gender equality have largely side-stepped this critical issue. Reflecting on the objectives and action points in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, this briefing concludes that specific economic policy reforms are vital if the aspirations made a quarter century ago are now to be realised.

1. Introduction

This year will mark the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, which agreed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), arguably the most progressive global agenda yet for advancing women's rights. Although not legally binding, it is an important consensus-driven political agreement adopted by 189 member states.

The BPfA is made up of two parts: a Declaration outlining the broad political commitments made by governments to advancing women's human rights, and a comprehensive Platform for Action that sets out the steps needed by stakeholders across 12 thematic areas or "critical areas of concern" to realise those commitments.ⁱ Heavily inspired by the legal obligations set out in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the BPfA's intended purpose was to improve the situation of *all* women, recognising the further challenges experienced by women living at the intersection of other systems of oppression like race, age and disability.¹

Twenty-five years on, there has been some progress in advancing gender equality, including the establishment of UN Women – an agency dedicated to supporting member states to set and meet global standards on gender equality – and the creation of a standalone goal on gender equality within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, there has also been notable backlash against some of the most

ⁱ The 12 critical areas of concern are Women and Poverty, Education and Training of Women, Women and Health, Violence Against Women, Women and Armed Conflict, Women and the Economy, Women in Power and Decision-Making, Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women, Human Rights of Women, Women and the Media, Women and the Environment, and the Girl Child.

hard-won gains, particularly in areas such as sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and sexual orientation and gender identity. Less publicised, but just as pernicious, has been the backlash within macroeconomic policymaking itself, with devastating impacts on the lives of women the world over. Macroeconomic decision-making by governments and international financial institutions (IFIs) determines how economies are organised, how wealth is distributed, how vital public services are resourced – and, by extension, how women’s human rights are (or are not) fulfilled.

This briefing takes a closer look at a range of macroeconomic policies that featured prominently in the BPfA, but that have received relatively little critical attention since, and are one of the areas where the least progress has been made. It concludes with recommendations on macroeconomic policy that are necessary if the aspirations of the BPfA are finally to be achieved.

2. Women’s rights activists and macroeconomics at the Beijing Conference

The Beijing conference was one of the first of its kind to recognise the critical importance of macroeconomic policy for women’s rights, acknowledging it as a central feminist concern. A number of global economic events were instrumental in placing the economy at the centre of the negotiations in 1995. Many Southern women were still living through the devastation of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) instituted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Meanwhile women in the Global North faced substantial cuts in public expenditure following the recession in the early 1990s, while Eastern European and Central Asian women were newly experiencing the impact of neoliberal economic policies after the fall of communism in 1989. These sets of circumstances helped feminists from around the world find common ground.

Organisations like Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), the International Association of Feminist Economists (IAFFE) and the Coordination Unit from India were central in advocating for policies that were not merely reactive to the damage caused by current economic policies, but rather highlighted the need to create alternative visions of how economies should function.² They also called for women to be more actively involved in shaping their economies in order to ensure that their realities were reflected in them.

Today, despite widespread criticism, the basic tenets of SAPs remain intact and austerity policies have come to dominate policymaking. Yet another global debt crisis is looming, and many developing countries continue to lose billions of dollars a year through illicit financial flows in an unreformed global tax system. Macroeconomic policy decisions continue to undermine women’s rights but receive little attention in global debates on gender equality. Against that backdrop, women’s rights activists today are arguing that 2020 presents a renewed opportunity to once again place macroeconomics at the centre of the Beijing+25 process.

3. What the BPfA says about macroeconomics

The BPfA recognises the central role of the economy in fulfilling women's rights. Economic policymaking is addressed in two of its "critical areas of concern": Women and Poverty and Women and the Economy. In both areas, specific thematic problems are outlined followed by a list of agreed strategic objectives and corresponding actions to be taken by governments, international financial institutions (IFIs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in order to achieve them. A feature of both areas has been the importance of democratising economic decision-making to ensure that women are actively engaged in the design of the economic policies that have such a large influence in their lives.

Women and Poverty

The four strategic objectives offered here represent the most comprehensive analysis of macroeconomics in the BPfA, and they illustrate how it can be used to address the needs of women in poverty.³ They highlight the limitations of relying solely on anti-poverty related programmes, instead stressing the importance of mainstreaming a gender perspective across all economic analysis, tackling the economic structures that have denied women access to key resources and public services, and instituting democratic decision-making in the economic sphere.

The first strategic objective in this area (A.1) stresses the need to "review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development strategies that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty".⁴ The following actions for governments are proposed:

- **Review and modify macroeconomic policies** to address the structural causes of poverty and reduce gender inequality (para 58a and 58c), with IFIs to analyse the gendered impact of their policies (para 59b).
- Ensure the **full and equal participation of women in economic decision-making** around the design and monitoring of macroeconomic policies (para 58a and 58c).
- **Reprioritise public spending decisions** so that they address the social, educational and health needs of women, especially those living in poverty (para 58d).
- Address the challenges of **inadequately funded social protection systems**, placing women and men on equal footing (para 58g and 58o).
- Address women's **lack of access to resources** such as land (para 58m and 58n).

Women and the Economy

This "critical area of concern" covers some fundamental areas in macroeconomic policy, like women's access to what is now termed **decent work**, and recognises how **women's unpaid care work** is a significant source of their poverty. Specifically, strategic objective F.1 is to "promote women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over

economic resources”.⁵ Actions for governments to take to meet this strategic objective include:

- Promote **equal pay** for work of equal value (para 165a) and eliminate **discriminatory practices** in employment (para 165c).
- Ensure national policies related to **trade agreements** take into account gendered impacts (para 165k) and that **transnational corporations** abide by national laws and regulations (para 165l).

A later strategic objective (F.6) is to “promote harmonization of work and family responsibilities for women and men” and calls on governments to:⁶

- Regulate to **protect the employment** of those with family responsibilities and promote the equal sharing of these responsibilities (para 179a, 179b and 179c).
- Challenge **discriminatory attitudes** about the gendered division of labour (para 179d).

4. Challenges in implementing macroeconomic actions

There have been some signs of national-level progress in implementing the macroeconomic ambitions within the BPfA. For example, in its Beijing+25 country report, Rwanda has outlined significant steps taken toward increasing the number of women in all economic decision-making. The government is also conducting nationwide labour force surveys to determine the extent of women’s unpaid care responsibilities as part of its efforts to find appropriate solutions.⁷

However, such pockets of progress are coupled with considerable challenges. The limited number and varying quality of national reviews, conducted by UN member states to assess their own national-level progress on implementing the BPfA, has also posed difficulties in fully gauging success. A major problem has been governments’ and IFIs’ focus on what can be termed “micro-level interventions” like microcredit for women entrepreneurs or financial literacy interventions that expand effective participation in the economy. While important, these measures tend to focus on increasing opportunities for individual women rather than looking holistically at the way that different economic policies could remove the structural barriers facing much larger numbers of women.⁸

Macroeconomic policy’s true impact on women’s rights is glaringly absent from most analyses of progress, leaving the harmful effects of neoliberal economics on women’s rights largely ignored. The dominant neoliberal economic model has substantially shaped both national and global macroeconomic policy, presenting ever more obstacles to, and detrimental effects on, women’s rights – privatisation of key public services, growing influence of corporations in economic decision-making, drastic reductions in corporate taxes and suppression of wages, to name just a few.⁹ Moreover, to meet the strategic objectives outlined across the BPfA, a major challenge for governments has been maximising the resources available for gender equality – yet

in Africa alone, governments lose an estimated US\$50 billion in annual revenue through a combination of both illegal and socially unpalatable tax practices by wealthy individuals and multinational corporations.¹⁰ Meanwhile, looming debt crises will engender further claims on public coffers.

5. 2020: a year of opportunities and threats

The 25th anniversary of the BPfA provides a critical opportunity for women's rights to take centre stage on the international political agenda. This year will also include a number of important events such as the 64th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women; UN Women's Generation Equality Forum, beginning in Mexico in May and concluding in France in July; and the UN General Assembly's High-Level Meeting to commemorate the anniversary of the Beijing conference in September. It is at this final UN process where funding commitments, to ensure the full implementation of the BPfA, must be on the agenda.

However, there are also dangers. National- and regional-level reviews in 2019 have highlighted upcoming challenges with the Beijing+25 process, including continued contestations around language and a lack of political will to ensure the BPfA's full implementation.¹¹ In addition, the 12 "critical areas of concern" have been replaced by six thematic areas, which means that concrete ambitions on macroeconomics could be lost in wide-ranging cluster groups like 'Inclusive Development, Shared Prosperity, and Decent Work', or 'Poverty Eradication, Social Protection and Social Services'.¹² Advocacy in 2020 also takes place against a volatile global political landscape and the very real threat of backlash and regression, particularly around bodily integrity issues such as SRHR. This makes cooperation among different groups of women's rights activists all the more vital.

Yet, despite these challenges, the Beijing+25 process provides a valuable – and long overdue – opportunity to refocus attention on macroeconomic policies that are critical for delivering women's rights and gender equality.

6. Recommendations on macroeconomics in the Beijing+25 process

If the ambitions laid out 25 years ago at the Beijing conference are to be met, governments will have to make changes in a number of areas of macroeconomic policy. Below are key recommendations that governments should prioritise in 2020, in line with the BPfA, with more detail available in previous publications by the Gender and Development Network.¹³

Unpaid care

The need to harmonise work and family responsibilities was recognised in the BPfA. Unpaid care work acts as a major barrier to economic, political and social activity for those who perform it. As a responsibility overwhelmingly borne by women, unpaid care work encompasses tasks such as domestic work, childcare and elder care. Care

services are critical for the functioning of all societies and economies, yet orthodox economic policies have consistently failed to acknowledge their central role.

Recommendations to governments on addressing unpaid care work:

- **Recognise the value of unpaid care work**, invest in data collection to measure its contribution to the economy and include this contribution in national accounts.
- **Increase investments in high quality, affordable and accessible public care services** to redistribute responsibility for care provision from families to communities.
- **Invest in labour-saving equipment and infrastructure** such as electricity, water, sanitation services and public transport to help reduce unpaid care burdens.

Decent work

The BPfA recognises the importance of workplace policies to protect against gender discrimination, as well as the need for safe working conditions and employment benefits. This right to decent work has subsequently been formalised through the International Labour Organization's (ILO) conventions, which include the right to collective bargaining for employees, equal pay for work of equal value and paid parental leave.¹⁴ Enforcing such standards is particularly critical for women, the overwhelming majority of whom work in the informal sector doing low paid, poor quality and precarious work outside of formal regulations and workplace benefits.

Recommendations to governments on decent work:

- **Promote and protect labour regulations that promote decent work for women**, including collective bargaining and freedom of association, and ensure that employment regulations are extended to cover workers in the informal economy.
- **Ratify ILO Convention 189** on domestic work and **ILO Convention 190** on ending violence and harassment in the world of work.¹⁵
- **Support the creation of more and better-quality jobs in the public sector**, where women are disproportionately represented.

Universal social protection

The importance of universal social protection systems for achieving gender equality is recognised in the BPfA. However, women's unpaid care burdens and over-representation in informal work mean that they face considerable challenges in accessing vital social protections like pensions or unemployment benefit, which are typically based on in-work contributions and aimed at those in the formal sector.

Recommendations to governments on social protection:

- **Support the implementation of universal social protection systems for all women**, irrespective of past contributions.

Maximising resources to fund gender equality

The actions outlined for governments in the BPfA require well-designed, progressive taxation systems. From funding primary school education to providing SRHR services and preventing violence against women and girls, tax is a central tool for resourcing a variety of public services necessary to fulfil women's rights and deliver gender equality.

Recommendations to governments on maximising resources for gender equality:

- **Adopt progressive taxation systems** that raise revenue in a way that challenges gender inequalities.
- **Adopt gender-responsive budgeting (GRB)** as a tool for ensuring that government budgets support policy commitments to gender equality and women's rights.
- **Support the creation of a global tax body** under the auspices of the UN.¹⁶

Corporate accountability

The power of multinational corporations was noted in the BPfA, but over the last 25 years corporations have gained significant powers in shaping global economic decision-making and now influence decisions around key issues like corporate taxation and labour rights. This requires new solutions including legally binding regulations alongside voluntary corporate responsibility initiatives such as the UN Global Compact.¹⁷

Recommendations to governments on corporate accountability to achieve gender equality:

- **Support the UN Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights process**, with components outlined by the Feminists for a Binding Treaty Coalition, to ensure a legal and internationally accountability framework for addressing systemic corporate power and protect women's human rights throughout business supply chains.¹⁸
- **Ensure all corporations pay their fair share of taxes** in the countries where they operate and abide by all national laws and regulations.¹⁹

¹ UN. 1995. *Beijing declaration and platform for action*. Beijing: United Nations, para 33.

https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf

² Agarwal, B. 1996. 'From Mexico 1975 to Beijing 1995', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 3.1: 87–92.

³ UN 1995, para 47–68.

⁴ UN 1995, para 47.

⁵ UN 1995, para 165.

⁶ UN 1995, para 178.

⁷ Republic of Rwanda. 2019. *Beijing +25 Rwanda country report*. Gender Monitoring Office: Kigali, Rwanda. https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/Beijing25/beijing_25_report_final_30_may_2019-2-1-rwanda.pdf

⁸ See for example the Ethiopian and Nigerian governments' Beijing+25 reports: <https://www.uneca.org/beijing25-national-reports/pages/beijing25-national-reports>

⁹ UN Women. 2015. *Progress of the world's women 2015-2016: transforming economies, realizing rights*. New York: UN Women, 190–230. http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf

¹⁰ AU/ECA Conference of Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development. 2015. *Illicit financial flows: report of the High-Level Panel on illicit financial flows from Africa*. Addis Ababa: UNECA. <https://www.uneca.org/publications/illicit-financial-flows>

¹¹ On regional meetings, see Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development. 2019. 'Press release: women and gender rights activists deeply disappointed with regional outcome on human rights', 19 November. <https://apwld.org/press-release-women-and-gender-rights-activists-deeply-disappointed-with-regional-outcome-on-human-rights/>; African Women's Development and Communication Network. 2019. 'Press release: Governments must deliver on the promises made to women in Beijing 25 years ago', 4 November. <https://femnet.org/2019/11/press-release-governments-must-deliver-on-the-promises-made-to-women-in-beijing-25-years-ago/>

¹² UN Women. 2018. *Guidance note for comprehensive national-level reviews*. New York: UN Women, 12. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/64/national-reviews/csw64-guidance-note-for-comprehensive-national-level%20reviews-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5456>

¹³ Woodroffe, J. 2019. *Push no one behind: how current economic policy exacerbates gender inequality*. London: GADN. <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/push-no-one-behind-how-current-economic-policy-exacerbates-gender-equality>; Woodroffe, J. 2019. *How social protection, public services and infrastructure impact women's rights*. London: GADN. <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-news/2019/1/8/new-briefing-how-social-protection-public-services-and-infrastructure-impact-womens-rights>

¹⁴ For more information, see ILO. 2020. 'Conventions and recommendations', *Introduction to international labour standards*. <https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/introduction-to-international-labour-standards/conventions-and-recommendations/lang--en/index.htm>; ILO. 2007. *Toolkit for mainstreaming employment and decent work*. Geneva: ILO. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---exrel/documents/publication/wcms_172609.pdf

¹⁵ ITUC. 2019. 'Historic adoption of Violence and Harassment Convention at centenary International Labour Conference (ILC)', *ITUC Campaign Newsletter* 5 (September). https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/html/gbv_newsletter_5_en.html

¹⁶ For more information, see Global Alliance for Tax Justice. 2016. 'The world needs a United Nations Global Tax Body now: the most equitable way to create a fairer global tax system', 18 April. https://www.taxjustice.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/GATJ-statement-GlobalTaxBodyPanamaPapers_18Apr2016.pdf

¹⁷ Rasche, A. 2012. 'The United Nations and transnational corporations: how the UN Global Compact has changed the debate', in J. Lawrence and P. Beamish (eds) *Globally responsible leadership: business according to the UN Global Compact*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 33–49.

¹⁸ *Integrating a gender perspective into the legally binding instrument on transnational corporations and other business enterprises: statement on the draft elements proposed by the OEIGWG chair*. 2017. <https://wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Jt-statement-gender-into-the-treaty-October-2017.pdf>

¹⁹ For more information, see Tax Justice Network. 2020. 'Country by country reporting'. <https://www.taxjustice.net/topics/corporate-tax/country-by-country/>

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